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ABSTRACT

This booklet addresses persons who would like information about leadership of community groups. It is meant to be read both by current community group leaders and by persons who aspire to be leaders. Roles and functions of community group leadership are presented, along with suggestions about how to carry out the leadership role in ways that promote accomplishment and pride on the part of group members. The final section describes two ways of sharing leadership: building leadership in other group members, and sharing or delegating decision-making within a group. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

GROUP LEADERSHIP: UNDERSTANDING, GUIDING & SHARING

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet addresses persons who would like information about leadership of community groups. It is meant to be read both by current community group leaders and by persons who aspire to be leaders.

Experience in the Rural Education Program has revealed three kinds of problems or questions that community group leaders frequently ask:

- What is the leadership role and how do I develop my own style of leadership?
- When is it appropriate for me to provide guidance to the group?
- How can I effectively share leadership and develop leadership skills in other members of the group?

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information and suggestions that can help you answer the questions listed above.

The contents of the booklet are organized into three sections. The first section presents information intended to help you understand roles and functions of group leadership. The second section discusses a model that can be used to help you decide when it is appropriate to provide active guidance to a group. The final section describes two ways of sharing leadership: building leadership in other group members, and sharing or delegating decision making within a group.

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP ROLES

The leadership role in a group has many names, and it might be useful to review some of the more common ones here.

Chairpersons. Traditionally, a group leader was called chairman. Nowadays the term chairperson is widely used to describe the same role. The person in this role is normally expected to prepare agendas, to call meetings to order, to see to it that someone records the minutes of meetings and to take care of various other details that need attention in order that a meeting be successful. The role of chairperson is also often associated with formal operating procedures, such as those proposed in Robert's Rules of Order. Most formal procedures provide the chairperson with substantial power within a group, and so the role of chairperson tends to be viewed as a powerful one.

Convener. A new role for the group leader is currently enjoying wide-spread popularity and use: the role of convener. A convener's role is very much like a

chairperson's but is less formal. Indeed, many people who have the title "chairperson" actually are in the convener role. It is important to separate the two roles in order to judge which is appropriate in a given situation. For example, the role of chairperson as described above is appropriate when working with a very large group, or with a group, such as a school board, having specific legal responsibilities. The role of convener is appropriate for groups having up to twenty or thirty members and for groups that desire to be flexible in their operating procedures.

Instead of personally developing an agenda for a meeting, as a chairperson might do, the convener might ask all group members to submit agenda items. Then the convener may build the agenda at the meeting with the group. The convener often tends to be a gatekeeper, helping the group move through an agenda, rather than a "pusher" who forces a group through an agenda. While a chairperson is often regarded as the final arbiter in procedural matters, the convener usually works with the group to arrive at procedures acceptable to all.

Process Facilitator. Another new role that one is beginning to see in citizens' groups is that of Process Facilitator. This rather complicated term describes a person, normally not a regular group member, whose main role is to assist a group in learning useful ways or processes for accomplishing tasks and working together effectively. Process facilitators usually are not concerned with the particular content of a meeting, nor does the process facilitator usually have a stake in the outcome of decisions the group makes. His or her task is to help the group make decisions well--not to influence the group in the direction of a specific decision. More and more frequently leadership of community groups is carried out by a team, consisting of a convener and a process facilitator. The facilitator acts as a kind of consultant, coming to the group with no vested interest but having potentially useful resources, while the convener (who is the visible group leader) is a regular group member but with much less procedural "power" than the traditional chairperson.

LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS

Regardless of whether your leadership role is that of chairperson, convener or facilitator, there are four functions of leadership which may be distinguished.[1] Every leader performs each of these functions at one time or another, but different functions may predominate in different persons. An individual's unique "blend" of the four functions is his or her leadership style. You may wish to think about the extent to which you practice each function. Do you perform each too little, too much? Do you perform each at appropriate times? If you find you are dissatisfied with your performance of one or more leadership functions, you may find the examples listed in the descriptions below helpful.

Directing Function. The directing function refers to taking charge of what is going on in the group. The directing function may include such things as selecting the meeting space or actively proposing and working towards an outcome that, in your opinion, the group should work towards. Other directing functions include confronting disruptive members, bringing conflicts among group members into the open, and setting norms for the group, such as speaking for oneself, defining the tasks for the group, outlining how tasks will get done and so forth. Often you may exercise this function by doing things to expand the norms of the group, such as bringing in outside speakers, introducing the technique of "process observation,"* or introducing new roles for group members.

* Process observation is a technique for helping a group gather data about the way it operates. The technique is described in the booklet "Community Groups: Keeping Them Alive and Well," pp. 10-11.

Caring Function. The caring function involves supporting group members in what they are doing. Within the caring function, such things are included as offering encouragement and praise, attending to participants' comfort by providing breaks and refreshments and making sure everyone in the room knows each other. The importance of this function cannot be overestimated, since human beings have a very finely tuned sense of whether others care for them or not. For example, nonverbal behavior may directly contradict our verbal statement saying that we care about the participation of others in the group. Thus a very important part of the caring function has to do with letting people know that what they are saying matters to us, and that we are interested enough in what is being said so that we do not interrupt, look bored or behave impatiently with them.

Analyzing Function. When you interpret information for the group, you are performing the analyzing function. For example, if your group receives notification from a city agency that you may submit a proposal to develop a parcel of land into a playground, you may need to make sure that group members understand what it is that the city requires when a proposal is submitted. Another example of the analyzing function occurs when you interpret data that have been gathered by a process observer about the way in which the group has been operating.

Structuring Function. The final function to be discussed here, the structuring function, concerns setting up situations in which other group members are encouraged to take increasing responsibility for themselves and for the group's activity. Simple structuring behavior includes such things as asking questions and making suggestions to promote participation in solving a problem that is at hand. Also, checking with the group to see if an agenda item has received enough discussion so that it can be voted upon is a simple way to engage group members in taking responsibility for what is going on. Another, more complex example of structuring behavior is managing the work of task forces, in the event that a group has formed several task forces to accomplish a substantial piece of work.

It would be ideal if it were possible to describe when, and under what conditions, each leadership function were appropriate. For example, one of the most frequent questions people who work with groups ask is, "When is it appropriate to silence a disruptive group member?" The only answer that respects the uniqueness of each situation is, "When it is appropriate." The real question is, "How do I determine when it is appropriate to silence a disruptive group member?" Appropriateness varies from group to group, from day to day and from situation to situation. There are simply no general rules, and each situation must be evaluated separately.

What you need to do is to understand as clearly as possible your own leadership style, and one way you can do this is by answering such questions as: What are my goals as a leader? What are my motives? What kind of relations do I wish to have with group members? What are their expectations of me as a leader--what are my expectations of them? As you develop answers to these questions, you will come to understand your own leadership style. This understanding will give you a basis for determining how to deal with disruptive group members, as well as how to deal with nearly every other type of leadership problem.

The information and suggestions in the next two sections are designed to help you develop your leadership style in terms of behavior designed to guide the group and behavior aimed at sharing leadership.

GUIDING THE GROUP

In this section, a framework will be discussed that is designed to enable you to distinguish when it is desirable to engage in active, visible leadership. In such cases, you are guiding the group.

Researchers have suggested that small groups tend to develop through four, identifiable stages:

- Forming: The group begins with a need to establish the ground rules, and exhibits dependence on the group leader.

- Storming: After the ground rules and the leader have been established, some group members challenge the authority of both. Conflicts among group members that have been latent are also likely to surface--or if they do not, to cause dysfunction invisibly.

- Norming: As the group works through conflicts of the "Storming" stage, it begins to establish realistic, working norms and to set about its tasks.

- Performing: As the group gets into its tasks, it finds imaginative, unique ways to do its work. Members trust each other enough to try things out or to offer constructive criticism of suggestions that are clearly not feasible.

This pattern of group development suggests that at the beginning of a group's life, in the "Forming" stage, you need to prepare to be actively and visibly in the leadership role. And you must, perhaps more than anything else, be perceived as reliable. While you cannot be expected to know all the answers to orientation questions new group members will have, you can at least be expected to provide straight, unambiguous answers. Group members' trust for you is likely to be formed on first impressions, and if

the first impression yields low trust, it is very difficult to rebuild. In the early stages of a group's life, it is important for you to take special care to:

- Be on time
- Be careful not to impose hidden agendas on group members
- Make realistic statements about your expectations for the group
- Show that you take the group seriously
- Show that you have hope for the group

Careful planning for the first few group meetings can have a strong effect on people's willingness to participate. Some specific things you can do are:

- Arrange for a comfortable space for the meeting
- Be sure you have access--keys--to the meeting place
- Know where restrooms and drinking water are
- Make sure chairs and tables are available
- Have all equipment ready--have enough of it
- If possible, arrange for refreshments

- Build an agenda that includes
  - time for people to get to know each other
  - activities that will give the group an immediate sense of accomplishment
  - a review of accomplishments and a discussion of next steps
- Know and be able to explain the purpose of the group in simple language

In addition to helping a group get oriented and comfortable, you can help the group establish operating norms. You can do a great deal to start things off right by setting an example for staying on the agenda--or if modifications need to be made, for negotiating agenda changes with the group. It may be necessary to check with group members to see whether anyone is confused. You can also encourage people to speak their minds, and to make unique and imaginative suggestions about how to do a task or solve a problem. If you do these things, there is a much greater likelihood that the group will develop the confidence to define and solve its own problems.

Soon group norms, if they are clearly established, will be tested or challenged by one or more group members. Though it may seem disruptive, this kind of challenging is part of a process of development that groups go through. If you face up to it, the challenge will in the end produce more effective and meaningful norms. You need to be prepared during the time that leadership is challenged not to react defensively, even though you may feel a personal challenge. On the other hand, you needn't simply lie back and wait to get trampled. The challenge to leadership is a chance to share leadership, as will be discussed in the next section.

Active, guiding functions of group leadership are most usefully practiced during the "Forming" or beginning phases of a group's life. But since dependence on the leader characterizes the first stage, it follows that if you persist in the guidance function, the group tends to remain dependent, and therefore in an early stage of development. When group members do not have a sense of development, they either get frustrated and quit, or get frustrated and sabotage you, or get frustrated and just sit there.

SHARING LEADERSHIP

As suggested above, some group leaders, when their leadership is challenged, react defensively and try to keep the leadership role entirely to themselves. Before we too hastily condemn them for being undemocratic, it should be pointed out that group members all too frequently encourage and support group leaders for not sharing leadership. Some reasons for this are easily found: If the group fails, the leader can be blamed; it entails a great deal of risk for a group member to take a leadership role; many people in citizens' groups are busy and do not readily accept roles that demand more time of them.

But there are substantial benefits to be derived from sharing leadership:

- More work can be done
- Group resources are expanded
- People feel greater investment in the group
- A feeling of equality develops among members

You can promote shared leadership by building leadership skills in other group members and by sharing decision making.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN OTHER GROUP MEMBERS

One of the first things you can do to assist others in acquiring leadership skills is to combat the expectations that may be present for not sharing leadership. This can be done in small, unobtrusive ways. When someone makes a suggestion, you can see whether that person is willing to follow up on it: you should not automatically be the one to follow up on a suggestion. If the group is small enough, you can perhaps arrange for every member to do something in preparation for each meeting. Perhaps one member will bring refreshments, a second will provide transportation, a third will arrange for the meeting room and a fourth will prepare a summary of the minutes for the past three months. Another member may volunteer to be recorder, and yet another to be a process observer. These people should be given credit: they need to know that the group depends on them. It's not as a personal favor to you that they do these things; it is in order to create and sustain the group.

Between meetings, most of these functions may be rotated. It is not, however, normally constructive to rotate the leadership role at each meeting; instead a chairperson or convener should serve long enough to get comfortable with the role. Then it may be passed on to someone who would like to develop leadership skills.

You will often need to help persons learn new roles, such as convener, process observer and recorder, and so you may wish to develop a list of things conveners or recorders typically do. A sample appears on the following page.

Riverdale School Community Group

The Convener of the Riverdale School Community Group...

- is selected every six months
- is a person who wants the task
- begins the meeting
- builds an agenda after getting suggestions for agenda items from group members
- monitors progress through the agenda to make sure the group stays on time
- is flexible
- makes sure decisions are recorded
- makes sure no one is railroaded
- makes sure everyone who wants to, gets a chance to speak

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Figure 1: Sample Helpsheet for a New Convener

You and your group should, of course, build your own list that is appropriate to your specific situation.

Another type of activity that lends itself to shared leadership in a group is leadership of task forces. A Helpsheet similar to Figure 1 can be prepared for leaders and members of task forces.

As people see others like themselves being successful, the norm for volunteering for tasks will develop.

SHARING DECISION MAKING

Along with developing the leadership role in group members, another effective way of sharing leadership is through sharing or delegating decision making. Again, the place to start is with expectations of group members, since many times the group will expect you to make decisions for it. You need to help the group realize that those decisions in which everyone has a stake have a much greater chance of succeeding.

It can happen that when a group becomes very skilled at making decisions, too much time is taken up with decision making because the group feels that every decision must be made by the group, or else it is failing to practice "Group Decision Making." You can help the group come to realize that not every decision is of such importance that it has to take up the entire group's time. In every group, there are probably decisions which are best made by individuals or small groups. For example, each individual makes the decision whether to attend any specific meeting. Another example involves a community group that wrangled for two hours on the issue of whether or not an extra meeting should be held during a particular month. Had a task force been delegated to study the problem and make a recommendation to the whole group, time would have been much more efficiently used.

An easy way to find out who should make decisions in a group is to help the group build a chart such as the one in Figure 2, on the following page.

Riverdale School Community Group

Decision-Making Analysis

Type of Decision	Person/Group Who Should Make Decisions
Membership	Individuals
Adopt Agenda for Meeting	Whole Group
Site Selection for Fund-Raisers	Task Force
Goals for Year	Whole Group on Recommendation of Task Force
Recommendations to School Board: Problems Solutions Plans	Whole Group on Recommendation of Task Force
Operating Procedures	Whole Group
Selection of Special Roles: Process Observer Recorder	Individual Volunteers

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Figure 2: Sample Decision-Making Analysis

Shared decision making can give the work of task forces added importance. If a task force is allowed to develop its own procedures, do its own work and reach its own decisions, it will in all likelihood be a more effective body.

At the same time, shared decision making may take its toll on you as a group leader. As group members become more and more self-initiating and interdependent, you may feel you have less and less of a role. But this need not be the case. The leadership role can change to one of managing the work of task forces. The leader can begin to serve as a resource person instead of an "answer person." Everyone will benefit as more gets done in less time with a more equitably distributed workload.

One other word on shared decision making. Just as it is unrealistic to think that one person should make all decisions for everyone else, it is just as unrealistic to think that all decisions can be shared or delegated. It may prove beneficial to consider the following aspects of shared decision making.[2]

- Persons will become involved in shared decision making when the decision is important for them, when the decision has direct consequences for them.

- Persons will become involved in shared decision making when the decision to be made is within their scope of experience and scope of competence.

- Persons will become involved in shared decision making when their acceptance of the decision determines the degree of implementation. For example, if you attempt to gather information on meeting evaluation forms without consulting group members, you will get one of two responses: lousy or none.

SUMMARY

In this booklet, roles and functions of community group leadership have been presented, along with suggestions about how to carry out the leadership role in ways that promote accomplishment and pride on the part of group members. The group leader is seen as a person who guides a group through certain stages of development, and also as a person who can work actively to stimulate the development of leadership skills in others. The encouragement of leadership skills in others is one of the most important things you can do to help overcome apathy towards public participation in public affairs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Adapted from John E. Jones and J. William Pfeiffer, The 1975 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators. La Jolla, California: University Associates Publishers, Inc., 1975, pp. 63-67 and pp. 138-139.

2. Edwin M. Bridges, A Model for Shared Decision Making in the School Principalship. St. Ann, Missouri: Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory, 1967.

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